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## Religion and the Secular

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## **Religion and the Secular**

### **Abstract**

This chapter explores how the modern distinction between religion and the secular has become a debated and contested discursive tool in the political organization of modern societies. This discourse is in operation in scholarly works as well as in public debates. Both are introduced and examined in this chapter. The main argument is that while important social and political issues are negotiated with the help of categories such as ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’, scholars should pay more attention to what is achieved by deploying such categories and distinctions in various locations and contexts.

Keywords: religion, secular, discourse, media, politics, public

### **Introduction**

US Secretary of State, John Kerry, wrote in 2015 that ‘if I headed back to college today, I would major in comparative religions rather than political science. That is because religious actors and institutions are playing an influential role in every region of the world’ (Kerry 2015). He referred to religion having an influence on politics, diplomacy, violence and peace-building, among others. Indeed, such topics are common among scholars in disciplines and subject areas such as religious studies, International Relations, politics, history and sociology. However, only some of the approaches consider the role of language. This chapter explores how the modern distinction between religion and the secular has become a debated and contested discursive tool in the political organization of contemporary societies. Although the terms are old, the distinction itself – locating the ‘secular’ as the ‘non-religious’ sphere of public politics, as distinct from the private, non-political sphere of ‘religion’ – has a specific modern history. This discourse is in operation in scholarly works as well as in public debates (media, politics).

For the sake of simplicity the area of study can be divided into two main approaches, although there are significant differences within each approach. The first one uses religion and the secular as analytical concepts, defining them and exploring the ways in which the two are separated or integrated in theory and practice. It sees them as two different languages with two different rationalities, often ending up offering a normative standpoint that should guide the organization of society and politics. Section one will examine this approach. The second one does not define the terms but studies their uses in different context and explores what various actors are trying to achieve by separating religion and the secular. Section two introduces this approach and contrasts it with the approach presented in section one. Section three will extend section two by focusing on recent ways in which religion and the secular have been distinguished from each other in public discourse. The concluding section will summarize the argument and suggest ways forward.

### **Two languages: religion and the secular as analytical concepts**

### *Habermas and the post-secular*

The key dividing line in current scholarly debate concerning religion and the secular in different disciplines is between those who see the distinction analytically meaningful and those who see the distinction as an object of discursive study. For instance, the influential work of Jürgen Habermas is a good example of the former. Habermas (2010; 2011) sees religion and the secular as two different rationalities. Religious language is the language of a particular community, whereas secular language is supposedly universal, common to all. This is typical for the modern discourse that is predicated on the idea that religion should be a private matter, whereas secular language dominates public and political spheres. Habermas's writings on the post-secular address the problem that follows from modern discourse: people who are 'authorized to practice their religion and to lead a pious life in their role as citizens are supposed to participate in a democratic process whose results must be kept free of any religious "contamination"' (Habermas 2011, 24). The writings begin with the assumption that religion has (or should have) been separated from the rational conversation of the public sphere, but now the norm has to be re-evaluated: religion should not be excluded from the public discussion, although religion remains subordinated to the rules of public discussion, because religious arguments and utterances should be translated into secular, 'generally accessible language' (Habermas 2011, 25).

One of the rare examples of translations Habermas provides is that the biblical idea that humans are created in the image of God can be translated as a defence of human freedom and autonomy. The reasons why Habermas seeks to find bridges between two supposedly different languages in politics, and more generally in the public sphere, are at least two-fold. First, that is how the public discussion becomes more inclusive and more democratic, thus providing a more solid foundation for society. Second, Habermas assumes that religions are moral resources. Understood in this manner, religions appear as special cases supplementing what is lacking in secular rational discussion. In this sense, Habermas's way of conceptualizing two distinct languages is rather conservative if secular language and morality are not enough to protect people against the potential risks of technology, science and global capitalism. Therefore, there are two ways of interpreting Habermas's vision of the relationship between religion and the secular in his writings on the post-secular: (1) the slightly anti-religious way, which sees religions in need of translation in order to be part of rational (and secular) deliberation; and (2) moderately pro-religious way, which sees secular deliberation in need of moral support from religions.

Habermas is widely discussed, but many others have addressed religion/secular models by which societies are organised and should be organised. For instance, the distinction between religion and the secular has been operationalized differently in different nation-states. The United States works as a case for pro-religious secularism. This means that secularism is meant to guarantee freedom of religion and equality for all groups and practices in a way that they can flourish in the private sphere and civil society. France offers another model by applying a strong principle of state neutrality towards religions by not supporting any of them. The British model is built upon the established church (Church of England). It guarantees a privileged role to one institution, but it is argued that with 'moderate secularism' minority religions are protected too. The model thus functions as a facilitator for religions in public life and operates with institutional compromises (see Berg-Sørensen 2013). British political scientist Tariq Modood (2010) has defended the relative separation of Church and State as opposed to what he calls an 'absolute separation' between them. Relative separation allows for the existence of an established church. The justification is done by suggesting that because the Church of England has contributed so much to British society, it is possible to accept its privileged existence. A further step is to question whether the situation should be changed. Modood has asked whether the situation should be levelled down or levelled up. A

more secularist approach is to level down (to diminish the role of religion in politics and the public sphere), whereas a more pro-religious approach is to level up (to extend the role of religion in politics and the public sphere by including minority religions). If there are so many models of secularism and so many meanings of what secularism is, it is a question of persuading others to consent to one's proposed meaning. One way to analyse different positions is to study where the arguments come from. At least three positions are at play: (1) some think religion and the secular should be as far apart as possible; (2) some defend moderate secularism but limit the privileges to dominant religion (e.g., the Church of England); and (3) some (like Modood) approach the issue from a point that tries to see what is best for 'religious minorities', particularly Muslims. What all such positions share is the conviction that religion and the secular are essentially different rationalities and languages.

### *Maximalist and minimalist models*

Another way of looking at the debates between religion and the secular has been developed by US historian of religion, Bruce Lincoln, who pays special attention to language and discourse. He defines religion as 'discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal' (Lincoln 2012, 1). He suggests that societies operate with what he calls maximalist and minimalist models, or ideal-types of religion. Maximalist style is based on the conviction that religion ought to permeate all aspects of social existence. Minimalist style restricts religion to 'an important set of (chiefly metaphysical) concerns, protects its privileges against state intrusion, but restricts its activity and influence to this specialized sphere' (Lincoln 2003, 5). Typical example of the maximalist type is Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966) who was a leading member of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood; an example of minimalist type is Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) who argued that religion is best suited to metaphysical questions and gave it a significant but marginal role. This model functions in mapping the relationship between religion and the secular.

The heuristic value of the model is that it helps us to understand the widespread discourse in which Islam, for instance, is divided into two forms, moderate and radical/extreme. The binary translates into good and bad forms of Islam and a distinction between those who integrate into dominant liberal societies by showing loyalty (minimalist style) and those who do not (maximalist style) (McCutcheon 2005, 77; Wijzen 2013). The first term in the binary is often named as true Islam, whereas the latter term signifies what is not really Islam but politics. In February 2015, President Obama referred to the spokespersons of ISIS and al-Qaeda suggesting that 'they are not religious leaders, they are terrorists' (Obama 2015). The linguistic construction of these binaries and the politics they convey are relevant objects of study in our attempts to explain and understand how religion, language and politics are entangled, and not the detection of whether acts we call extremist, radical or terrorist are truly religious or not.

Overall, Lincoln's reading of the final instructions for the September 11 hijackers and comparisons between Osama Bin Laden's videotaped address from October 7 2001 and George W. Bush's address to the nation given in 7 October 2001, clarify how religious discourse functions in politics. Furthermore, he puts an emphasis on the empirical, rather than normative, approach (Lincoln 2012, 1; Habermas 2011, 26; Modood 2010). What his approach shares with Habermas and other aforementioned scholars is that religion and the secular are used as analytical concepts. The same is the true for so-called political theology – a debate that combines empirical analysis with normative deliberation.

## *Political theology*

It has become commonplace to talk about a so-called ‘return of the religious’ in political theory. This is also known as political theology, which investigates how theological concepts, ideas and discourses relate to politics. German jurist and political theorist Carl Schmitt argued in his *Political Theology* that ‘all significant concepts in the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts’ (Schmitt 1985 [1922], 36). His ideas have inspired many interesting disputes about whether contemporary politics can do without theological and religious language. Furthermore, it is relevant to study how the separation of religion and the secular has never been as clear as hoped for in modern political theory, as well as how the leaking of ‘religious’ language into a supposedly ‘secular’ sphere has taken place in the past and in the present, either consciously or unconsciously. However, there is a tendency in these examinations to see theological and religious concepts everywhere, and to reduce the notion of ‘secular’ into almost an impossibility.

British philosopher Simon Critchley argues in *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (2014) that modernity ‘can best be viewed as a series of *metamorphoses of sacralisation*’ (Critchley 2014, 10). This approach rejects the all-too-simple story that sets secular modernity in opposition to pre-modern religion and explores the traces of theological language in politics. Furthermore, it leaves the door open to study how various practices are sacralised independently of whether they are classified as religious or secular. This approach is fruitfully developed in Durkheimian cultural sociology of the sacred, particularly in the works of Robert Bellah, Jeffrey Alexander and, more recently, Gordon Lynch (see Lynch 2014). The more problematic part appears in normative statements and in some readings of various political theorists. Critchley (2014, 24) notes that politics is not practicable without religion. It cannot be effective in mobilizing people without a religious dimension. Similar arguments can be found in theorists such as Giorgio Agamben, Alain Badiou, Terry Eagleton, John Milbank and Slavoj Žižek (Hyman 2013). Theorists are seeking the middle ground between theism and atheism, but the problem here is that practically everything becomes theological (or religious). A good example is Critchley’s reading of John Gray’s political philosophy.

Gray’s critique of the modern emancipatory project as surrogate religion is predicated on the idea that ‘humans are an animal species much like any other’ (Gray 2003, 108): there is no progress in society, no perfectibility of humankind and all we can do is to learn to live with conflict (Gray 2002; 2003). Critchley (2014, 109–117) argues that Gray’s dystopian idea that humans are killer apes assumes that humans are flawed and potentially wicked creatures. He sees this as a naturalized version of the idea of original sin. There are at least two problems in this equation. First, the closeness is superficial, as almost any rejection of the idea that humans can become more perfect would count as an example of a version original sin. Second, such theorizing leaves very little space for what is not religious. If even brutal criticism of the surrogate religiosity of modern politics, without any other form of salvation, is just another version of theological and religious discourse, the whole idea of the non-religious ‘secular’ appears almost useless.

## **Discourses on religion and the secular as objects of study**

If Habermas maintains a clear epistemic break between religious and secular languages, the break has practically vanished in much of political theology by reducing the notion of the secular to a minimum. Yet another way of approaching these issues is to study how the categories of ‘religion’ and the non-religious ‘secular’ have developed and are used in practice in relation to other

categories. This approach has been condensed to the idea that despite countless studies focusing on the relation between religion and politics, they are not studies ‘of the formation and function of categories in rhetorical discursive constructions’ (Fitzgerald 2007, 25).

The basic idea is to look at how claims to have a religion (or its denials) are strategic discursive tools used by individuals, groups, institutions and governments in organizing social practices. These approaches have very little or no use for analytical definitions of ‘religion’ and the ‘secular’. Furthermore, they agree that modern discourse on religion – religion as a distinct private, non-political sphere of life that has to do with personal commitments and experiences of the divine and salvation of the soul – developed in the seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe and the United States, although earlier discourses are still in operation. These approaches have focused on ‘religion’, but when the genealogy of religion and contemporary discourses are explored, they also tend to analyse ‘secular’.

### *Nation-states*

One of the most significant contexts in understanding the formation of modern discourses on ‘religion’ is related to the nation-states. Russell T. McCutcheon (2003, 241) has argued that religion is a discursive tool by which dissent is domesticated. Rather than seeing groups, practices and ideas as political (potential threats to the powers that be) designating them as ‘religious’ (private experiences that have to do with meaning, but not with collective action) makes public dissent impotent. Dissent can be thought of (in private) but not acted upon in public. If ‘religions’ become public actors, they are not labelled as religious anymore. They are political fanatics, fundamentalist, terrorists or not ‘really religious’ at all. This modern invention of ‘religious’ sphere is, according to this line of thinking, a governmental strategy by which large-scale social identities are controlled, domesticated and marginalized. Thus, in the context of the rise of nation-states, religion has been a category utilized in creating a peripheral space separate from the political sphere. It has domesticated forms of utopian social and collective action that were at odds with the state by labelling them as private matters. ‘Religion’, then, became the space in which collective goals are individualized and made into a question of personal preference and conviction (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013, 29, 60–61).

In the modern era ‘religion’ has been potentially at odds with governance and sovereignty (Stack 2015, 7), but at the same time it has worked for nation-states. McCutcheon (2003, 261) goes as far as to speculate that the liberal nation-state may not have been possible without the modern concept of religion. Timothy Fitzgerald (2007, 6) has argued similarly that in order to imagine politics – an area of supposedly rational action – it has been historically necessary to invent a discourse on religion that naturalises Euro-American secular rationality.

Although the individualization and castration of collective sentiments and passions may have been one of the functions of discourse on religion from the point of view of nation-states and governments, the development would not have been so smooth if the groups themselves would not have benefited from that. Modern nation-states pushed ‘religious’ groups towards homogenization while privileging one institution (e.g., Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox). In his analysis of John Locke’s distinction between private and public Craig Martin (2010) contends that the distinction did not simply marginalize groups and institutions deemed religious, but secured their right to socialize their children in the dominant ideology that guaranteed the privileged status of Christian institutions and norms while making the imbrication of Church and State largely invisible. Thus, rather than seeing the distinction between private and public or Church and State as two fully separate spheres,

they should be seen as interlinked in a way that helps us to analyse the circulation of power from one sphere to another. These two aspects of the function of the discourse on 'religion' in modern nation-states – governing by the state and maintenance of the privileged position of dominant 'religious' groups – have been nicely captured by Talal Asad (1993, 28), who concludes that the modern discourse on religion is 'at once part of a strategy (for liberal seculars) of the confinement, and (for liberal Christians) of the defence of religion.'

The domestication of potentially disruptive groups is not only enacted by the state, but both majority and minority groups themselves take active part in negotiating whether they are a religion or not, often with the implication that if they are religious they are not political. Groups themselves employ the discourse on religion, thus seeking protection, recognition, privileges as well as a representative position with people using the same identity tag (Owen and Taira 2015; Taira 2010). Negotiation over the religiosity of Judaism in minority positions is a case in point. Judaism began to be conceived as a religion in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Prussia. Prior to the modern era, there were Jewish communities with specific rules of conduct – including laws with punishments, rules for excommunication and so on – but Judaism was not understood as a distinct, 'religious' sphere of life. The discourse on Judaism as a religion developed as an answer to the problem concerning Jewish integration into the German state: the classification of Judaism as a religion was a strategic attempt to assimilate Jews into a modern nation-state by suggesting that Judaism is something different from 'the supreme political authority of the sovereign state and may in fact complement the sovereign state' (Batnitzky 2011, 6). Hence, Judaism is rendered into its own domesticated sphere where it is relatively separate from a political (as well as scientific and economic) sphere of life.

One of the key authors arguing for the religiosity of Judaism was Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) who wrote during a time when Jews had no civil rights in Prussia. Judaism was accused of being a state within a state that could not be integrated into the Prussian one. It was understood in political terms, but Mendelssohn defined Judaism as a religion as opposed to politics in *Jerusalem: Or on Religious Power and Judaism* (originally 1783). There is Jewish law, according to Mendelssohn, but it does not have any political power or coercion like states have. As such, there is no problem integrating Jews into the modern nation-state (Batnitzky 2011, 13–28).

### *Colonialism*

Colonialism is another significant context for the emergence and proliferation of the category of religion (Arnal and McCutcheon 2013; Asad 1993; Chidester 1996; 2014; Dubuisson 2003; Fitzgerald 2000; 2007), although it is by no means separate from the development of the modern nation-states. Discourse on religion has been entangled with modern colonialism in at least two related ways: Western colonialism asserted its superiority by extending their categories outside Western societies, and colonized people have been governed by negotiating their religiosity (or lack thereof) in concrete colonial contexts.

Daniel Dubuisson (2003) argues that the development of the modern discourse on religion became the West's central reference point, around which it organized itself. Of course, there was discourse about gods, rituals and so on before the modern era, as well as many uses of Latin 'religio' and pre-modern uses of English-language 'religion' referring to Christian truth that did not stand in opposition to politics, economics and the state (Fitzgerald 2007; Nongbri 2013), but not the kind of sphere or domain which was a result of selecting and isolating certain ideas and practices that formed a unity of some kind. Christianity was conceived as the only proper religion, whereas others

were similar to it, but considered inferior. Various binaries, such as monotheistic religions/polytheistic religions, universal religions/ethnic religions, historical religions/cosmic religions, were not neutral classificatory tools, but indicated different stages in the evolutionary history of religions. In each binary, Christianity was on top, the most advantageous religion, thus integrated into colonialist discourse of the supremacy and superiority of the West (Dubuisson 2003). This mapping of the world in terms of ‘religions’ universalized the category, but at the same time, it projected western concepts and hierarchies onto others.

To give a more concrete example, the discovery of ‘indigenous religion’ in southern Africa in the nineteenth century depended upon colonial conquest and containment. Earlier travellers, missionaries and colonial agents reported the absence of religion among Africans. The lack of religion was part of a larger colonial classification in which the humanity of others was denied. They were practically seen as uncivilized animals. As David Chidester suggests, ‘the assertion that people lacked a religion signified, in general terms, an intervention in local frontier conflicts over land, trade, labor, and political autonomy’ (1996, 14): ‘Without religion, like animals, the indigenous people of the Cape had no right to the land’ (1996, 38). Once an African community was placed under the colonial administration of a magisterial system, it was discovered to have an indigenous religious system, thus demonstrating how negotiations over religiosity were part of local control mechanisms (Chidester 1996, xv; 2014, x). The knowledge gathered was useful for Britain, which was, to use the words of theologian F. D. Maurice from 1847, ‘engaged in trading with other countries, or in conquering them, or in keeping possession of them’ (quoted in Chidester 1996, 131).

Southern Africa is just one case among many. In his study of English-language uses of the word ‘religion’, Timothy Fitzgerald (2007) argues that discourse on religion, in addition to being about private meanings and experiences marginalizing dissent, has been a discourse on civility and barbarity. The European West has considered itself civilized as opposed to others who are barbarians. Civilized people are Enlightened or have Christian religion, whereas others have no religion at all, or they have a false religion. One example of such a discourse is to be found in Charles Darwin’s notes. He wrote about the (non-European) ‘savages’ in Tierra del Fuego who were very different from civilized Europeans. The difference, according to Darwin, was ‘greater than between a wild and domesticated animal’ (Darwin 2010, 15). He suggested that there is no reason to believe that these ‘savages of the lowest grade’ (Darwin 2010, 29) ‘perform any sort of religious worship’ or have ‘religious feelings’ (Darwin 2010, 24–25). What makes this particularly curious example is that we see Darwin – the idol for many contemporary secularists and atheists – speaking highly of religion. However, religion – here practically synonymous with civility and Christianity – was seen not as the endpoint of history, but, at least for the educated elite, something to be surpassed in the course of history. In this sense, colonialist discourse on religion was entangled with evolutionary stages in which ‘religion’ played an intermediary and temporary role between pre-modern savages and the future secular society.

What has been offered here is not a short history of religion and the secular, but a short history of modern discourses on ‘religion’ and the (non-religious) ‘secular’ and their political functions. The importance of nation-states and colonialism has been emphasised, although the development of the modern discourse on religion and its relation to other categories (secular, politics, economy) has been more complex and a more long-ranging process. Furthermore, such discourse has not remained the same throughout the centuries and, what is perhaps more important, it has never been possible to reduce the functions of discourse on religion to one or two aspects. In order to demonstrate the multi-functional and heterogeneous nature of discourse on religion and its continuing connections with politics, the next section focuses on more recent examples.



## Discourses on religion and the secular in contemporary public life

### *Problematic conceptualizations of religion*

One of the most relevant recent contributions for the conversation about the topic of this chapter is Timothy Fitzgerald's *Religion and Politics in International Relations: The Modern Myth* (2011). The study analyses the ways in which scholars of International Relations (IR) distinguish religion and the secular and thus legitimate what he calls the modern myth: the idea that politics is a sphere of (Euro-modern) rational activity, as distinguished from the 'religious' sphere full of irrational and supernatural ideas. His point is that recent interest in studying religion among IR scholars fails because they apply the category of religion without paying attention to its highly contested nature, without deconstructing the myth by examining how the categories are employed, and for what purposes.

Fitzgerald's historical argument is that the idea of 'religion' and 'politics' as two separate spheres emerged in the late seventeenth century, at least in English sources. This discourse with its essentialised concept of religion is prevalent in the recent interest in religion among scholars of politics and IR. Religion was largely ignored in those fields for a long time: of about 1600 articles published in selected IR journals, only six featured religion as an important influence between 1980 and 1999 (Fitzgerald 2011, 29). Vendulka Kubáľková (2013) locates the so-called 'turn to religion' in IR to the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, although she notes that one of the foundational conferences took place in 1998. It is one thing to examine why this took place, but another to examine how religion and (secular) politics have been conceptualized, with Fitzgerald concluding that there is a 'tendency to talk about religion as though it is a thing or even an agent with an essentially different nature from politics' (Fitzgerald 2011, 107). In practice, this often means that religion is seen as being a cause of the world's problems, or that pure religion is contaminated by politics (see Hurd 2015).

Indeed, public discourse is filled with influential commentators who first generalize in the name of religion and consequently explain actions with reference to people's religiosity. A well-known example is Samuel Huntington's thesis on the clash of civilizations (Huntington 1996 [1993]) in which he takes Islam as one civilizational identity among others. According to Huntington, civilizations are differentiated from each other most importantly by religion, and these differences, though not necessarily violent in themselves, 'have generated the most prolonged and the most violent conflicts' (Huntington 1996, 4). One problem with this is that in order to reach the idea of Islamic civilization as a relatively homogeneous unit, it is necessary to put together more than one-and-a-half billion adherents who cover a third of the inhabited area of the world, approximately a dozen societies and half a dozen main languages (Said 1993; 1994). Another problem is that religion becomes an agent-like being in the world, or that adherents' acts are explained by religious motives. A recent provocative, but illustrative, example was given by Sam Harris, popular US critic of religion who is known as one of the 'New Atheists', who suggested that if he could wave a magic wand and get rid of either rape or religion, he would not hesitate to get rid of religion (Harris 2006). This statement makes sense only if religion is understood as an agential cause of problems and motivational force of people's behaviour. It goes directly against scholarly advice given by Arnal and McCutcheon (2013, 6) who question the usefulness of religion as an explanatory term. In other words, people do not do this or that because they are 'religious'; they act on the basis of variety of practical reasons that require empirical examination (see also Hurd 2015).

### *Disputes about what counts as religion and the secular*

In addition to exploring the language use of scholars and popular authors, negotiations that concern the religiosity of groups, practices and symbols are fruitful cases for demonstrating how religion, language and politics are intertwined, and how discourse on religion plays a part in the organisation of social and political practices. Two developments are particularly prominent. First, minorities are increasingly making strategic claims to have a religion in order to get recognition and benefits of various kinds. Second, the (usually Christian) majority tries to maintain its position in ever-more diverse societies by relabelling practices and symbols that have been previously considered 'religious' as 'cultural' or part of 'tradition'.

One of the British Druid organisations – the Druid Network – achieved charitable status on the basis of advancement of religion in 2010 after a process that took several years (Owen and Taira 2015). Finnish Wiccans failed to get the status of a religious community in the early 2000s after the Supreme Administrative Court decided against them in a tight vote (4–3) (Taira 2010). They did not achieve official recognition, but another Pagan group 'Karhun kansa' ('People of the Bear') succeeded, after initial rejection, in 2013. These successes and failures are partially dependent on language use. For instance, using attributes such as sacred and spiritual and saying 'worship' and 'ritual', rather than celebration and festival, improves the chances of being regarded as a religion, as was the case with the Druid Network (Owen and Taira 2015, 102). In the UK, many consider Jediism – a 'religion' based on the popular film *Star Wars* – as a joke, but hundreds of thousands have announced in a Census that Jediism is their religion. Furthermore, claiming Jediism as a religion has been a successful rhetorical strategy for being heard in public and even getting public apologies from officials in instances where wearing a hooded top was challenged. As one Jedi stated: 'Muslims can walk around in whatever religious gear they like, so why can't I?' (Taira 2013, 485). In Turkey, Alevis – a group traditionally considered part of Islam – have begun to use the language of 'religion' rather than 'culture' since the late 1980s in order to distinguish themselves from Sunni Muslims, because the laicist order, with its homogenizing ambition, does not recognize Alevi identity separately from Sunni Islam (Dressler 2011).

What is common to these examples is that people are appropriating discourse on religion, claiming their identity and/or practice as 'religious', thus aiming to achieve a better public image and distinctive voice in the public sphere, recognition from the state and dominant culture, and more concrete material and legal benefits (financial aid, legal protection, tax reliefs, possibility for being integrated into religious education in schools and so on).

A related development is that in many cases 'religion' disappears and becomes 'cultural', thus supporting the dominant churches. One recent example is the Lautsi case (Beaman 2015). Finnish-born Italian resident Soile Lautsi made a case of the presence of crucifixes in state-school classrooms. She suggested that they violate the principle of religious freedom. After losing her case in the Veneto Administrative Court in March 2005 she appealed to the Supreme Administrative Court, who upheld the earlier decision. She appealed again and in November 2009 the European Court of Human Rights decided the case in favour of Lautsi. Finally, in March 2011, the Grand Chamber of the European Court of Human Rights overturned the judgement of the lower chamber, holding that the crucifixes do not violate religious freedom and parents' right to educate their children. What is interesting in the case from the point of view of this chapter is how the nature of a crucifix was negotiated from ostensibly 'religious' to sufficiently 'secular' by implying that a crucifix is a symbol of Italian culture and suggesting explicitly that Lautsi was attacking both the

‘dominant religion of the State and the unity of the Nation’ (*Lautsi and Others v. Italy* 2011, at para 19, quoted in Beaman 2015, 43). The reasoning of the court was such that, although the cross is ‘certainly a religious symbol’, ‘it evoked principles that could be shared outside Christian faith’. The ‘democratic values’ were seen to be rooted in the ‘message of the cross’; the message could be ‘read independently of its religious dimension’, thus being ‘perfectly compatible with secularism and accessible to non-Christians and non-believers’ (*Lautsi v. Italy* 2009, at para. 35, quoted in Beaman 2015, 44).

Heated media debates and court cases concerning garments that signal collective belonging are relatively similar, often focusing on veils (Muslims) and turbans (Sikhs), and as a result, temporarily classifying a particular garment as either a religious obligation or sufficiently secular – the choice of an autonomous individual or as an ethnic/cultural symbol. Although veiling has been a contentious issue for a long time, with turban campaigns taking place in Britain in the 1970s and 1980s, debates on ‘religious’ dresses have become commonplace in twenty-first century Europe. Changes in media technology have made it possible for these local and national cases to become part of an ever-more global mediated consciousness in which ‘religion’ and ‘secular’ constitute one of the organising binaries.

Despite the recent rise in scholarly interest in secularism, not been many studies have focused on discourses on ‘secularism’. Studies examining different models of secularity and normative political debates concerning the best possible model have flourished, but usually these do not ask explicitly how the word is used, and for what purposes. One exception is *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred* (Knott, Poole & Taira 2013); it analyses, among other things, the ways in which British media employ the term.

Their study of British media found that ‘secularism’ in the local British context is something negative that threatens people’s beliefs, convictions and even British lifestyle, whereas ‘secularism’ elsewhere, particularly outside Europe and in non-Christian contexts, is a significant political instrument that protects people from religious fanatics. In this discourse good secularism is supportive of moderate religiosity, especially Christianity, and bad secularism – mainly the British one – is limiting as it, according to a media commentator, does not ‘allow space for imagination and fantasy, for the sense of mystery, myth and morality’ (Knott, Poole & Taira 2013, 115). The media deals with very different systems in their examples of secularism, but the media uses the same word for all varieties and does not provide enough background information for understanding different national histories. Therefore, it can be argued that the discourse functions by legitimating moderate and liberal Christianity at home and Euro-modern values elsewhere. The conclusion about the nature of domestic language use is supported by Steven Kettell (2014) who demonstrates the growth of anti-secular discourse in British public debate. Such discourse is prevalent in MP’s statements in all the biggest parties, although it is more common among Conservatives than Liberal Democrats or the Labour party. The so-called secularists are increasingly labelled as aggressive, intolerant or militant. Consequently, secularism is increasingly seen as anti-British, and it serves those politicians whose interest it is to promote a greater role for faith-based organizations in British society.

There are plenty of other relevant examples about strategic uses of secularism in contemporary society. For instance, American republican politician and former presidential candidate Rick Santorum suggested in 2014 that ‘we should start calling secularism a religion’ (Garcia 2014). The obvious political context of this statement was his worry about the exclusion of Christianity from education because it is classified as religion. If secularism were classified similarly, it too could be banned from education. Such examples demonstrate that the disputes about what counts as religion

go hand in hand with what counts as secular. Both concepts are used strategically for achieving concrete benefits and recognition, and they deserve attention from scholars interested in language and politics.

## Conclusion

There are plenty of studies focusing on religious language and the intertwinement of religion and politics. Studies addressing all three – language use, politics and religion – have been rare. This chapter has mapped various ways in which language, politics and religion are entangled with each other and, more specifically, how discourses on religion and the (non-religious) secular have developed in relation to politics and functioned as strategic governmental tools. The increased interest in religion is clear among scholars who analyse the role and function of religion in contemporary politics and explore different models of secularism. This trend is likely to continue in the future. As long as religion is seen as a salient political force in world politics, scholars will find it relevant to study it empirically. Scholars with normative aspirations will continue to debate which model of secularism works best in a given context, and some will continue to suggest that liberal-democratic politics can do without the language of secularism (Bader 2013). These approaches pay attention to the relationship between religious and secular languages. In addition, this chapter has introduced a slightly different approach to studying discourses on religion and the secular by paying more attention to what is achieved by deploying such categories and distinctions. It is likely to provoke both appreciative and critical responses by those who consider the terms analytically useful. While it is unlikely that any strand or approach introduced in this chapter is becoming so dominant that it would absorb others, more effective conversation between them would at least render visible the blind spots of each approach and further contribute to the need to pay attention to religion and the secular in the study of language and politics.

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